

DALZIEL + SCULLION

North Light Arts John Muir Residency

HOMING

an animal's ability to return to its territory after traveling away from it

Oxford Dictionary

Introductory essay by Euan McArthur



HOMING IN ON HOME

The title *Homing* is concise yet rich. It alludes to the 'homing instinct', the innate ability of animals to find their way back to their birthplace; and to 'homing in', to close in on a target. Both senses are relevant, and together they suggest an even more apposite sense: to intentionally home in on the sustaining life-world which is our home. Home, in this book, is 'nature' understood in its everyday meaning of the organic world of animals and plants, land and sea, day and night, weather and seasons; the world which, despite human impacts of innumerable kinds and scales, comes before us and sustains us. The notion of homing in on home, then, implies, first, the recognition of the natural world as home, and second, to get close to it – or rather, to be in it, to feel ourselves part of it.

Dalziel+Scullion call the book a 'field guide for reconnecting with nature'. It has the practical character which that suggests, but it is held together by an argument and an ethos. The argument is that, over several centuries, most human

beings have progressively lost touch with nature, because modern forms of life and technologies, which shield us from nature's harsher aspects, have also distanced us from it – less often directly encountered, nature is less often thought about. Now, more than half the world's population live in urban centres (including 47 megacities with 10 million or more in each). On the one hand, urbanisation and technology are leading people away from nature, but on the other, ecological crisis is pointing us back, to the recognition that 'spaceship earth' is the only home we have. The global challenge is complex and intimidating, but Dalziel+Scullion suggest that it is through intimacy with nature, at the level of the individual, that change will grow its deepest roots. That experience of depth is expressed by the Norwegian concept of *friluftsliv*, advocated, notably, by Fridtjof Nansen and, later, Arne Naess. A philosophy which regards immersion in nature as a spiritual and psychic good, *friluftsliv* well describes the ethos which underlies *Homing*.



Why an artists' field guide? The answer is that Homing is not a guide to nature, but to fulfilling experiences – experiences of (re-) connection – which can be had in nature. Artists are attuned to how experiences can be created, heightened, directed or connected, and they are good at enabling others to see what is overlooked or taken for granted. Both aspects are demonstrated throughout Homing. It is really a guide to how under-explored capacities to enjoy sensations and feelings aroused in nature can be activated and given cognitive, creative and therapeutic value, and to fulfil the desire to connect, in personal ways, with the world around us. Artists, also, are makers and Dalziel+Scullion encourage (and guide) users of Homing ('readers' is too passive a term) to make and collect for themselves. Demonstrating how simple, practical acts can lift the blinkers of habitual or goal-driven behaviour and expand the sensory world is central to their perspective. So, Homing is organised by action-words like 'Seeing', 'Hearing' and 'Collecting'. Intensified connection with nature as a value in itself is the goal, as John Muir would have understood.

Muir took with him to America the knowledge and love of nature which he had discovered as a boy in the fields and woods

and along the coast around Dunbar. In his mature writing, he often joins the telling detail to the broad view, part to whole, in a flowing weave of perspectives in which the aesthetic and the scientific complement each other. Following Humboldt and Darwin, he grasped that everything in the world is interconnected and interdependent, with nothing existing in isolation from its context or environment. The word 'environment' itself has a Scottish connection: it was given its modern meaning (the enveloping totality which shapes and sustains all living things) by Thomas Carlyle in 1828, ten years before Muir's birth.

The concept of the environment places us and our activities within nature, making us part of its system, acting and acted on. As Alfred North Whitehead noted, "there is no definite boundary to determine where the body begins and external Nature ends." Nature as an organic, reciprocal, beautiful plenum flows through Muir's writing, like the clear waters of the Merced River. It seems right, then, that Homing should encourage its users, through direct, practical activities, to (re-)connect to that vision of nature in the very environment that first formed John Muir.

Euan McArthur